

ESSAI

Volume 13

Article 24

Spring 2015

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Recommended Citation

Krone, Teresa (2015) "Stalin's Relentless Drive to Industrialize Agriculture," *ESSAI*: Vol. 13, Article 24.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol13/iss1/24>

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Stalin's Relentless Drive to Industrialize Agriculture

by Teresa Krone

(History 2225)

John Scott realized that an opportunity for a prosperous future was elusive in an America on the threshold of the Great Depression. He believed the potential for a career as a welder could be better obtained in the Soviet Union, which was on the verge of industrialization. But after he arrived in Magnitogorsk, Scott witnessed a scenario different from what he had anticipated. The industrialization was moving forward at a feverish pitch alongside the glaring reality of a starved workforce; "Money was spent like water, men froze, hungered and suffered, but the construction work went on with a disregard for individuals and a mass heroism seldom paralleled in human history."¹ Stalin's fanatical expectations, that placed profit above human dignity, would require superhuman efforts of a dehumanized workforce to persevere. In *Behind the Urals*, Scott documented his experiences at Magnitogorsk amidst Stalin's relentless drive to industrialize. Stalin was compelled to not only mechanize farming but also force it under the Communist regime's control, which would result in a population subservient to the state. He realized the profits from collective farming would subsidize an enormous war fund. Stalin's breakneck quest to industrialize agriculture via collectivization generated an unpredictable food distribution system, which resulted in undernourished workers and a volatile food market.

Peasants suffered tremendously under the communist regime and the collectivization effort was an event, "which all Bolsheviks expected to see eventually, but the fact that when the gamble met mass resistance and caused unfathomable ruin, Stalin *saw it through to completion*. No one else in or near the Bolshevik leadership, Trotsky included, could have stayed the course on such a bloody social-engineering escapade on such a big scale."² Stalin moved forward at a zealous pace in 1929 as he ordered the execution of thousands of kulaks. Millions more were deported and condemned to the gulags. Children of kulak farmers, even those educated in careers far removed from farm life, were banished to toil in factories.³ Peasants retaliated by slaughtering their livestock rather than live under Stalin's dictatorship. These actions combined with a draught led to a famine, which was ignored by Stalin, who refused to distribute adequate amounts of grain held in reserve by the state. Scott revealed that millions died, including workers of Magnitogorsk, during the winter of 1932-33 but he did not appear to have spoken out freely against the injustices. He was also reserved in describing the more enjoyable meals he consumed, such as the plentiful lunch he was served while touring a local state farm. Perhaps he discerned that if he wanted to continue eating, he needed to remain a silent observer.

An example of disorganized distribution was evident in the initial phase of this poorly planned state farm located near Magnitogorsk. The location was far removed from the train line and truck deliveries were dependent on availability of gasoline. Consequently, production was hindered due to the absence of necessary provisions. The rush to collectivize without proper foresight was an example of Stalin's refusal "to tolerate deviation from plans, even though in reality the plans were far-fetched: targets did not reflect real possibilities, but symbolized determination to transform the nation into an industrial powerhouse."⁴ Had anyone complained about the broken system they would have been accused of being an enemy of the state. The conversion from hand tools to machinery was especially difficult for the peasants who clung to their traditional methods and often could not comprehend simple instructions. A dozen tractors provided by Moscow had never been sheltered from the elements, which resulted in nine remaining broken and abandoned. Laborers could scarcely

operate them let alone repair them and were too frightened by the adverse repercussions to complain. A loss of production due to their incompetence would have been perceived as the work of a wrecker. This was a highly plausible accusation due to the actions of some peasants who deliberately broke machinery. Nonetheless, after a few years, the peasants had acclimated and the farm was producing but Soviet mismanagement continued, as many more local farms were needed.⁵

Peasants who acquiesced to collective farming under the new socialist system provided another component in the food circulation. They were granted the concession to farm a small plot of land near their homes. This provided them with their own personal garden and also the chance to sell their produce and grains at market for whatever price they determined. However, their farming methods remained driven by hand tools and as members of the cooperative, they falsely perceived a rise in production of crops and livestock because of a shortened workday. The combined labor led to a shared sense of accomplishment while toiling as part of a team for the benefit of a country on the verge of a new era.⁶ But collectivization did not prove superior to capitalist farming and was not economically advantageous. "...Collectivization failed to deliver. Stalin assumed it would increase both the state's share of low-cost grain purchases and the overall size of the harvest, but although procurements doubled immediately, harvests shrank. Over the long term collective farming would not prove superior to large-scale capitalist farming..."⁷ Yet, Scott did not condemn collective farming. His father-in-law was chairman of a collective farm and pleased with the results and Scott also maintained a favorable stance.

Scott confirmed that one's status could also determine access to adequate meals and large discrepancies existed between the workers and administrators. Outside the Kirov district, Zavenyagin's home had a lavish garden and his staff also possessed sizeable gardens, some even requiring topsoil to be shipped in. Meanwhile, peasants in the Shanghai section shared their huts with chickens and pigs. Scott himself lived in a barracks for skilled workers, which possessed a seven-acre vegetable garden.⁸

Food cards were issued as a way to organize meals but this method proved unsuccessful at times. In an effort to drive employees to work harder, additional cards were handed out as rewards but the reality was that the food supply remained insufficient. Soup was then diluted to accommodate the excess cards. Thus, workers with only one card were fed even less of what meager meal they were accustomed to. Although the cards listed what provisions the workers were entitled to, that was no guarantee the products would be available. Scott related this information in a matter of fact way and stopped short of conveying details that would have brought to the forefront the agony of entire families working on a near-starvation diet. Although meat and butter were listed on the riggers card in 1932, the reality was that only bread and grain were available.⁹ The situation had stabilized by 1937, when more state farms had been established and more importantly, the transport of goods to Magnitogorsk was systematized. Aside from food cards, well-stocked stores provided food without requiring hours of time standing in line although the prices were considered prohibitive.¹⁰ Yet this phase of stability would soon expire, even for Scott and the more favored workforce.

Scott understood that metallurgical plants and factories that produced weapons and tanks acquired priority in the food distribution system over textile industries. As a result, the workforce of Magnitogorsk should have seen an increase in provisions alongside the levels of production that were increasing yearly. However, by 1941, as industrial production increased, there was again another shortage, this time of bread and salt.¹¹ Scott exposed a theme of inner conflict; that although the agricultural methods had been transformed during his years spent "*Behind the Urals*"; they remained driven by a Communist agenda. This agenda ultimately restricted the inherent benefits that collective farming would have provided under a capitalist system.

Footnotes

1. John Scott. *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 92.
2. Stephen Kotkin. *Stalin: Volume 1, Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 421.
3. Scott, 174.
4. Paul Josephson et al., eds., *An Environmental History of Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 73.
5. Scott, 95-98.
6. Ibid., 125.
7. Kotkin, 725.
8. Scott, xv.
9. Ibid., 79.
10. Ibid., 242.
11. Ibid., 254.

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- Kotkin, Steven. *Stalin, Volume 1: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*. New York: Penguin Press, 2014.
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